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TAGS: PGOV PHUM SOCI ECON CH

SUBJECT: LUWAN DISTRICT OFFICIAL RETURNS TO SHANGHAI AFTER MYSTERIOUS
DISAPPEARANCE IN FRANCE

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SHANGHAI, DEPARTMENT OF STATE.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

Summary

¶11. (C) An official from Shanghai's Luwan District returned home earlier this month after mysteriously disappearing during a business trip to France in October. It is unclear why the official vanished, or why he returned, but media reports have focused on corruption as the likely cause. Public scrutiny of the case was heightened because another official, from Wenzhou in Zhejiang Province, also failed to return from Paris during the same timeframe. Political observers say it remains unclear why the Luwan official disappeared, but the Shanghai public unfortunately is used to tales of corruption and now assumes officials are guilty until proven otherwise. One contact added that there is likely to be more scrutiny of corruption and government contracts in the run-up to the 2010 World Expo. End Summary.

Missing District Official Returns Home

¶12. (C) According to a November 4 Sina.com article, Xin Weiming, Vice Magistrate of Shanghai's Luwan District, returned to Shanghai in early November following his mysterious disappearance in France during a business trip in October. A CPC Luwan Standing Committee Propaganda Department official reportedly said Xin did not "disappear" during his trip to France but overstayed to receive medical treatment. The Propaganda Department official dispelled rumors that Xin had divorced from his wife or had an affair with another woman. Xin's wife and daughter remained in China during the trip to France, and according to the Sina.com report, Xin called the Luwan District Party Secretary from France after his disappearance. Local officials publicly said there was no evidence that Xin was engaged in corruption.

Strange Circumstances in Paris

¶13. (C) Sina.com previously broke the story of Xin's vanishing act on October 22, reporting that Xin had left a note in his hotel room, which said he was going to visit a friend in France and would not return to Shanghai with the rest of the business delegation. According to the October 22 article, Shanghai authorities were "surprised" by Xin's actions because they did not know of any corruption allegations or criminal charges

against him.

Luwan Official Not the Only One in East China

¶4. (C) Xin's disappearance attracted the attention of the media and online blogs especially because he was not the only East China official to abscond to France during October. The Christian Science Monitor and local media organs reported that Yang Xianghong, a District Party Secretary in Zhejiang Province's Wenzhou, never returned from his trip to France despite the request of two Wenzhou officials who were sent to Paris to persuade Yang to return home. In Yang's case, it appeared corruption clearly was the motivation for failing to return, as the local CPC disciplinary committee had questioned Yang three days before his trip.

Xin Disappeared for "Individual Reasons"

¶5. (C) In Xin's case, there remains speculation in Shanghai why he did not return from France as scheduled. Officials and observers we interviewed said they did not know why Xin disappeared, stating that it could have been corruption, medical treatment, an affair, or some other reason. Yang Zhijian, Director of Jingan District's Foreign Economic Commission, referred to the official line that Xin had his own "individual reasons" for not initially returning home. Zhang Renren, a Shanghai-based businessman who is well connected politically, told Poloffs on November 17 that the "individual reasons" excuse indicates the case's level of sensitivity. All local government officials have been instructed to say "individual reasons" when discussing the case, Zhang said, because the Shanghai CPC Propaganda Department obviously had issued an order to "get everyone on the same page." Zhang noted that media reports after November 4 also used the same "talking points," referring to Xin's "individual reasons" for his disappearance.

Corrupt Official? No One is Surprised

¶6. (C) Zhang, who has a relative who is acquainted with Xin's daughter, said as far as he knows, it is not clear if Xin is corrupt, having an affair, or sick. Even the family does not know anything, he stated. Unfortunately, however, the public is no longer surprised when officials are accused of corruption, Zhang lamented. And corrupt practices by officials remain difficult to prevent, he said, explaining that it remains easy for government officials, for example, to set up their own "consulting company" to help bidders through the public tender process on projects. The practice is widespread in Shanghai, Zhang said, and it's difficult to prove the consulting firms are merely "front companies" for corrupt officials.

Watching the World Expo and Construction Contracts

¶7. (C) The public is likely to pay even more attention to corruption in the run-up to the 2010 World Expo in Shanghai. Lu Hanlong, Director of the Sociology Department at the Shanghai Academy of Social Sciences, said he, like many other Shanghai residents, have been following the online political commentary on the Xin case. "Everyone is interested," Lu said. The public will pay close attention to corruption in the months leading up to the World Expo, as the municipal government offers more tenders for construction contracts in the city, Lu said. The government will need to make the effort to "keep the Expo clean," he emphasized.

Comment: Paying Close Attention to Corruption

¶8. (C) Corruption certainly is not a new problem in Shanghai,

and Chen Liangyu's removal in 2006 as Party Secretary remains fresh in the minds of local officials. Corruption is likely to get more attention in the coming months, however, as Shanghai prepares for the 2010 World Expo. In addition, the number of netizens paying attention to social and political issues will continue to grow. As the Luwan District case highlights, the public will assume in strange cases like this one that an official is guilty of corruption until proven innocent.

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